Faith of a Warrior

Before young Bobby was old enough and strong enough; to help his father Frank Vallejos earn a living; he would be sent to an uncle's homestead - mostly to get out from underfoot of his stepmother Gertrude. Tios Andeleseo and Henry Martinez, plus tio Diego Alderete lived in small towns between Hoehne and Timpas, Colorado; northeast of Trinidad on Hwy 350. They were humble, poor people that lived like the old ones had. They lived in an area of open, rolling hills, on the edges of juniper and pinon forests. Native blood and traditions guided their lives.

Tio Diego was more than just a sheep herder. Diego was an arrow maker, and an important man within his clan. The ancient art was being passed down to fewer young men. His sister was grandmother to this fidgeting bundle of curiosity. Young Bobby was the last in the coyote/fire clan to which he belonged. In native societies, family was an encompassing collection of aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. Respect for the elders, especially women, was taught early. These visits away from his parents' home gave young Bobby a chance to see how a loving family ***should*** be. There was always some sort of lesson to be learned.

Bobby found his tio sitting under an old juniper, cracking stones together.

"Can I make some fletchas (arrows) too?" The boy asked excitedly.

"No." said Diego firmly. "Why not?" he whined.

WHUMP! A sharp smack on the head was given with a deer antler. "Sit here by me, watch and be quiet!" scolded Diego.

With tio Diego's help, this early interaction with simple rocks set Bobby on a path that would guide the rest of his life. But for now, the young boy had to learn patience and observance: the keys to life.

By the age of 6, Bobby was tasked with filling two milk pails with rocks for his tio. With wild enthusiasm, Bobby filled both pails very quickly with any rock he could find. He would lug them back proudly. Yet Diego often discarded the stones from the pails as not worthy to work. Still the boy was sent off to gather more stones, which over the next several years created many large discard piles.

By the age of 8 or 9, Bobby slowly began to see the difference in the stones he brought back to tio Diego. Diego selected the hard, fine-grained, satiny colored stones to work. Bobby became more selective in the stones he brought back in his pails.

Years of carrying buckets of rocks had strengthened the muscle, sinews and grip of the young boy; to where his tio would allow him to practice breaking rocks on his own. Diego did not offer any of his good 'hard rock hammers,' for the boy to practice with. Within a short period of time Bobby learned he didn't have the right tools. After several frustrating days, Bobby finally asked his tio for a good rock hammer to use. Diego offered the boy one of abuela (grandma) Kiwidi's good stone manos (grindstone).

"Don't break it or lose it." Diego warned.

With renewed exuberance young Bobby tried again to cleave a workable blade away from the core material he had found. Repeatedly the stone would crumble or shatter from a blow by the mano. Frustrated and too afraid to ask his tio for help, Bobby headed home a little early.

Abuela Kiwidi was greeted by a glum, defeated Bobby as he slipped into her kitchen, letting the screen door slam behind him. He left his pails and stone tools by the door.

"Why the sad face?" she asked, as she poked at some fry bread floating in a skillet.

Bobby plopped down on a squeaky wooden chair at the kitchen table. "I don't think I want to make fletchas anymore. I can't make them like tio can. I can't find any good rocks."

Abuela Kiwidi slid the last of the fry bread out of the skillet, setting them on a towel to drain. She took her pipe down from the larder shelf, lit it with a stick from the stovetop, then extinguished the flame. She scooped up a fry bread and joined Bobby at the table.

"Here, eat this." Kiwidi pushed the hot sweet bread over to the boy. She leaned back in her chair and took a long draw on her pipe, regarding the smiling boy devouring the treat.

"Tell you what," she said slowly, "I'll tell tio you're going to help me pick berries tomorrow…and we'll go to a special place. But don't tell your tio."

Bobby's eyes widened as he swallowed the last bit of fry bread. Nodding eagerly, he agreed to keep the secret.

The following morning; after a breakfast of thin oat porridge, a chunk of bread and butter; Diego waved so long to Kiwidi and Bobby. They watched as he strode down the sandy trail, carrying a rope and ax – whistling softly.

"OK boy, bring your pails and come with me." Kiwidi called as she collected her own buckets, a canteen, a couple of sandwiches and apples, plus her tobacco pouch and old straw hat.

They headed down the same trail Diego took, but turned uphill, following a dry streambed for a couple of miles. The trees were taller there, and big rock outcroppings were abundant.

Young Bobby's eyes were down cast, hoping to spot a new stone he could use. Eventually they arrived at an area of heavier brush, near the shady side of a rounded hill. This area was new to Bobby.

"Are we getting close abuela?" Bobby sighed.

"We're here." Kiwidi announced, as she set her buckets down and took a seat on a large fallen log. "Come sit with me," she said, patting the old, twisted juniper.

Bobby gladly joined her, as she fished out her tobacco and pipe from the pouch around her waist. Both sat quietly, as the wind whooshed softly around nearby rock walls and pinon pines. The pungent smell of pine sap enveloped them, as the day warmed up. Cheerful birdsong sprang up all around them.

"Here…on this Round Hill, warriors in the old time fought many battles." Abuela Kiwidi stood and raised her pipe, reverently, to the four directions. Amidst a sprinkle of tobacco, she spoke her prayers to the ancestors, in the native tongue of the Pueblo people she and Diego descended from. Finished, she looked over to the wide-eyed boy and rejoined him on the log.

"We are in a sacred place, this Round Hill. It belongs to the ancestors. Everything here; every tree, every stone, plant and animal; belongs to the ancestors."

Abuela Kiwidi pulled open the drawstring on the calico bag that held their lunch. They shared water from the canteen. Together they ate lunch while she told him stories of sacrifice, brave warriors, spirits and respect. How the dead live still, protecting those they love and the land they revered.

"This Round Hill is sacred because it bore good fletcha rock. Many arrow makers made weapons and tools from the rock here. Never take or use *anything* from this place…it belongs to the warrior ancestors."

Kiwidi took a long draw on her pipe, then slowly exhaled the sweet tobacco smoke. Bobby took this opportunity to ask,

"Is this where tio Diego gets his fletcha rocks?" Kiwidi nodded.

"But why can he take the rock from the ancestors?"

Kiwidi smiled and said softly, "Because Coyotito, he asks permission. He says his prayers and gives offerings to the warriors. He is respectful and protects this place."

After finishing their lunches, Kiwidi directed the boy to go ½ way up the hill, then ask the ancestors for permission to use their rock. Then dig new rock from below the surface. Don't use the rock above ground which arrow makers had used before.

Bobby excitedly started up the hill with his two pails. Kiwidi strolled off in the other direction to pick berries. Bobby climbed further; pushing aside thick brush; mindful of thorns and rattlesnakes. He switched back and forth for an easier assent, just like a sheep or goat would. In many places Bobby saw broken rock strewn about, just like the shards his tio Diego produced, as he worked the stone. It was the same black-gray, fine-grained stone he had watched his uncle work.

Bobby found an outcropping of sacred fletcha rock. He set down the pails and picked up an old, weathered stone that had been worked by hand long, long ago. He held the stone to his heart and prayed for permission to use their sacred fletcha rocks, and for help to become a good arrow maker. He set the stone down and began to pull the soil away, using his hands and one empty pail. Slowly he found good, unworked fletcha rock. After filling one pail, Bobby suddenly realized he didn't have abuela's corn grinding mano. He knew he had left it in the bottom of the pail, but now it was lost.

In a panic Bobby prayed mournfully for the use of a rock hammer, because he was careless and lost the one trusted him.

A booming voice echoed from higher up the hill. Startled, Bobby reeled around to see tio Diego descending from the rocky outcropping above him.

"Roberto! What are you doing here?" Before Bobby could answer, Diego raised his hand for silence. He motioned to the boy to come sit down next to him.

"You did well and did the right things." Diego assured the boy.

"But I lost abuela's mano…" Bobby answered, head and shoulders scrunched together.

"I took the mano from your pail last night while you slept. You were not very observant." Diego smiled and patted the boy's arm. "Come, we are going to have a pow-wow in your honor!"

Still flustered by events, Bobby and Diego walked carefully down the hill and were met by abuela Kiwidi. Prayers of thanks were offered before leaving the sacred hill. As the three drew closer to home, young Bobby could hear several voices and peals of laughter. Relatives were arriving and bringing gifts of food and firewood to share. It slowly dawned on him that all this had been prearranged, and he had been 'set-up'. He grinned up at his tio and abuela then ran ahead to greet his older cousins.

This pow-wow was like a baptism of sorts, where family gathered to participate in this all-important naming ceremony. There was dancing and drumming, chants and songs. Someone brought a guitar to be played after the family enjoyed the roasted mutton, tortillas, tamales, peppers and more fried bread abuela Kiwidi had made. Someone even brought a watermelon!

Bobby was still a boy, but his personality had developed enough to be recognized and given a spirit name by his elders – he would now be known as: ‘Straight Arrow’.